

*In the turmoil of French history,*

***JACQUES ALLEON, first of the name  
(1753-1801)***

**Foreword**

With Jacques François Alléon, we find a much more reliable history, since everything that follows is taken from books and archival documents. Jacques died relatively young, at the age of forty-eight. His personal history is therefore not very rich. But it is interesting in more than one way, because it will inform us about the organisation of commerce in the various ports, and allow us to see how the French Revolution affected its citizens living in Constantinople. Events were in turmoil in the second half of the 18th century. Jacques' biography is therefore somewhat lost in the history of France at the time, and may sometimes seem impersonal to the reader. However, for a better understanding of the text, we felt it was necessary to develop certain unavoidable historical facts. The same reasons also led us to choose a linear and strictly chronological approach to the subject, rather than a thematic one. But let's take a look at all this, starting with his youth.

## YOUTH

### *A difficult youth*

Jacques Alléon was born on March 10, 1753, in Constantinople. He was the second child of a family of four. As with his father, the first years of his life are obscure. We suppose that he studied in Marseille, the city where he landed on September 7, 1763, at the age of ten. This was the age and place required to educate the children of Levantines.

Things only became clearer in 1775. Jacques was then twenty-two years old. That year, on November 20th, his sister Marie-Madeleine married a French merchant from Constantinople, Ange Rambaud. This marriage meant a great deal to Jacques' future, as it brought the Alléon family together with an important member of the Levantine trade.

Almost a month later, his father, Jean-François Alléon died.

At an age when he needed support to get started in life, Jacques found himself destitute!

It was probably due to the combination of these two events that he started working as a clerk for his brand new brother-in-law.

A few years later, his second sister Catherine married another French merchant from Constantinople, Pierre Olive. This was on June 2, 1782.

Three of Jean-François' children were now part of the Constantinople merchant corps. The fourth, Claude Francois, had no time for a trade. An untimely death took him from his family on September 18, 1784, at the age of 23.

The following year, Jacques Alléon, Ange Rambaud, and Pierre Olive decided to change the direction of their activities. Their plan was to create an import/export trade between France and the Ottoman Empire. To do this, the Rambaud and Olive would return to Marseille, the gateway to the East, while Jacques would remain in Constantinople. They would then send each other goods, which each would receive and sell for the other. All this, to be legal, would of course require the blessing of the French authorities.

The Rambaud family was the first to land in Marseille, in September 1785. At the same time, Jacques probably had to work for Pierre Olive. A few months passed, the time needed for Ange Rambaud to set up a trading house in his new town. When the time came, Jacques applied to the French Embassy in Constantinople. This request was accepted, and on March 10, 1787, the ambassador offered a nice birthday present to Jacques Alléon by writing to the Minister of the Navy of the time, Marshal de Castries, to transmit and support his subject's request:

*« Le sieur Jacques Alléon, Français employé depuis plus de douze ans en qualité de commis dans une maison de commerce française de cette échelle, n'a pour toute ressource que de simples appointements, à peine suffisants pour son entretien. Le sieur Rambaud, son beau frère, négociant à Marseille, voudrait venir à son secours et lui faire faire un petit commerce de pacotilles. Mais comme les dispositions de l'ordonnance ne permettent pas au sieur Alléon de recevoir et d'expédier directement des marchandises, ni aux négociants de cette échelle de lui prêter le nom, je vous supplie, Monsieur le maréchal, de vouloir bien lui accorder un certificat pour recevoir en son propre nom toutes sortes de marchandises, à l'exception des draps, et charger ici, sur des bâtiments français, celles de retour. C'est un certificat semblable que vous avez bien voulu faire expédier, l'année dernière, d'après mes instances, au sieur Pinel, et d'autres Français en ont également obtenu dans des temps antérieurs. Le sieur Alléon est plein de droiture et de probité et je n'ai jamais eu que des relations avantageuses sur son compte. C'est à ce titre que j'ose, Monsieur le maréchal, réclamer vos bontés en sa faveur... »<sup>1</sup>.*

(“Mr Jacques Alléon, a Frenchman employed for more than twelve years as a clerk in a French trading house of this port, has for any resource only taken a simple salary, hardly sufficient for his maintenance. Rambaud, his brother-in-law, a merchant in Marseille, would like to come to his rescue and have him set up a small business in junk goods. But as the provisions of the ordinance do not allow Mr Alléon to receive and send goods directly, nor do the merchants of this port would lend him the name, I beg you, Monsieur le Maréchal, to

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<sup>1</sup> Archives Nationales. Affaires étrangères, cote B1/448.

grant him a certificate to receive in his own name all sorts of goods, with the exception of cloth, and to load here, in French buildings, those of return. It is a similar certificate which you were kind enough to send last year, according to my request, to Mr. Pinel, and other Frenchmen who have also obtained it in previous times. Mr Alléon is full of uprightness and probity and I have never had anything but advantageous relations on his account. It is in this capacity that I dare, Mr. Maréchal, to ask for your kindness in his favour...”)

The response of Louis XVI’s minister was not long in coming. He gave it to the deputies of the Marseille Chamber of Commerce a month later:

*« Versailles, 15 avril 1787. Monsieur le comte de Choiseul-Gouffier m’ayant rendu messieurs, les témoignages les plus honorables de l’intelligence et de la bonne conduite du sieur Aléon (sic), et m’ayant demandé en faveur de ce commis un certificat qui l’autorisa à recevoir à Constantinople tous les articles de notre commerce, les draps exceptés, j’ai pris cette demande en considération et je vous charge d’en prévenir le sieur Rambaud, qui s’est offert à l’ambassadeur du roi pour majeur de ce nouvel établissement. Lorsque le négociant aura rempli vis à vis de votre chambre les formalités requises en pareil cas, vous voudrez bien délivrer au sieur Aléon le certificat dont il a besoin, en spécifiant l’exclusion du commerce de la draperie<sup>2</sup>.»*

(“Versailles, 15 April 1787. Monsieur le Comte de Choiseul-Gouffier having given me, gentlemen, the most honourable testimony of the intelligence and good conduct of Mr Aléon (sic), and having asked me in favour of this clerk for a certificate authorising him to receive in Constantinople all the articles of our trade, except for cloth, I have taken this request into consideration and I charge you to inform Mr Rambaud, who has offered himself to the king’s ambassador as the major of this new establishment. Once the trader has completed the formalities required in such a case, you will be kind enough to issue Mr. Aléon with the certificate he needs, specifying the exclusion of the drapery trade.”).

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<sup>2</sup> Archives de la Chambre de commerce et d’industrie de Marseille, cote J62.

Textiles were one of the most popular products in the Ottoman Empire. The French fought for the conquest of the market with the English, the Dutch, the Italians... The legislation governing the trade of these products was therefore particular, which explains the restriction imposed on Jacques and Ange Rambaud.

As Jacques' situation and future seemed stable, it was the Olive family's turn to return to Marseille. They disembarked and settled there in September 1787.

### **The organisation of Levantine trade**

It is time to open a parenthesis to explain how Levantine trade was structured. The corps of traders was, along with the diplomatic corps, one of the two main groups that made up the French nation of the port. These two groups worked together. They met and consulted each other whenever the situation required it, in meetings called national assemblies.

From the second half of the seventeenth century, the body of merchants felt the need to organise themselves in order to manage their affairs as well as possible, and to be more representative to their supervisory diplomats. To this end, the merchants elected two members to represent them: the deputies of the nation.

The system, which worked well, improved over the years, to the point of becoming indispensable. A circular from the king, dated 7 December 1779, was therefore finally issued. It defined the role and regulated the framework of the activities of the assembly mentioned above. The two deputies of the nation found themselves officially reinforced in their functions from that day on. In order to stand for a non-renewable two-year term, they had to meet the following conditions: they had to be at least twenty-five years of age, have been a resident of the port for more than two years, and not have suffered any bankruptcy. Voting could then take place, electing only one deputy out of two per year. This meant that the oldest member was the first deputy and the second, newly elected, replaced him or her in that capacity the following year. Once invested, these two deputies were in charge of looking after the interests of trade within the port, managing it, calling meetings when they deemed it

necessary... They also had to report to the unavoidable Chamber of Commerce of Marseille on the commercial activity of the port.

Ange Rambaud had the honour of being elected respectively second, then first deputy of Constantinople in 1770 and 1771; Pierre Olive from 1778 to 1780, Jacques in 1796 and 1797.

We can see from this example that family cohesion worked well. Jacques Alléon benefited from it. His situation was precarious at the time he began his working life. He was alone, without resources, and without any commercial experience. Twelve years later, he owned his own trading house, which was based on solid foundations.

His family situation, on the other hand, was not so good. His younger brother had died, his father had died and his two sisters were in France. His mother remained, divided between the East and Provence. And he, at thirty-four, was still single. He had to get married.

### *The marriage*

Jacques Alléon married in 1790, at the age of 37, a young French woman of twenty: Sophie Fonton. The latter, daughter of Antoine Fonton and Elisabeth Momartz, was born in Constantinople on 10 May 1770. Curiously, this young girl did not come from a family of merchants, but from one of the largest families of French diplomats present in the Ottoman Empire. Given the importance of the matrimonial alliance in the small society of Pera, it is interesting to dwell for a few moments on this illustrious Levantine family.

Its first representative, Joachim (1651-1709), was from Alixan in the province of Drôme, south-eastern France. For the anecdote, this village and that of Boulieu, the cradle of the Alléon family, are as the crow flies forty-three small kilometres away. He was one of the very first pupils of the French school for “young people of language”, created by Colbert in 1669. Ancestor of the present school of oriental languages, it was responsible for training student interpreters. Having spent time in the East, Joachim led a career as a dragoman, a profession which has now disappeared and

which consisted of acting as an intermediary between the European and Ottoman powers in fields as diverse as diplomatic negotiations, legal assistance, commercial transactions, and others. Most of Joachim's many children and grandchildren followed in his footsteps, creating a veritable dynasty of dragomans. This was, among others, the case of his grandson Antoine (1724-1802), from a family of twenty children and Jacques' father-in-law.

Antoine Fonton was at the beginning of his dragoman career in Seyde. Then, for almost forty years, he was attaché at the Constantinople embassy, where he held the position of first dragoman from 1769 to 1785, the year he retired. This was the most important role a dragoman could hope for in his career. When he left, two people were appointed to fill his position: the dragomans Pierre Fornetti and his own brother Jean-Joseph Fonton, whose marriage to Sophie Bénévéni « *fut probablement facilité par la considération dont bénéficiait au sein de la communauté latine le père de l'épouse, le docteur Jean-Félix Bénévéni, ancien médecin du sultan et du prince Mavrogordato*<sup>3</sup> » (“was probably facilitated by the esteem in the Latin community for the father of the wife, Dr. Jean-Felix Benevento, former physician to the Sultan and Prince Mavrogordato.”). Jacques' alliance with Sophie Fonton is in the same register.

However, this promising union and the rejoicing that accompanied it soon gave way to a period of turmoil, instability and great torment: the French Revolution.

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<sup>3</sup> Marie et Antoine Gautier : « Jean-Joseph Fonton (1747-1832), drogman de France et diplomate Russe. », dans le bulletin de l'association des anciens élèves de l'INALCO, page 60. Paris 1994.

## **THE REVOLUTIONARY CRISIS**

### ***The beginnings of the Revolution***

Indeed, in the meantime, the event that was to herald the start of the French Revolution had taken place in Paris: the storming of the Bastille. As we know today, this capture was not very important, but it was highly symbolic. It therefore had a strong influence on public opinion in our country. However, this was not at all the case in Constantinople. It should be pointed out that information circulated very slowly at that time. Louis XVI himself noted on his diary for July 14, 1789: Tuesday the 14th, nothing. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that the news arrived in the Ottoman capital a few months later and therefore that its importance had been reduced to its true value.

From the political point of view, Sultan Selîm III was initially rather hostile to these agitations. The autocrat was not happy with the example set by this rebel regime, which flouted the authority of a reigning sovereign. His people, on the other hand, were rather favourable to the French Revolution. They always remembered with rancour certain political choices made by the Court of Versailles against them: Louis XVI's support for the Russians and Austrians against whom the Turks were at war, the trade agreements signed with Russia in 1787, the withdrawal, in the same year and at Russia's request, of the military expertise aid that France granted to Turkey... So the man in the street treated the revolutionaries as friends, and the French refugees who were beginning to arrive in the Ottoman capital with great contempt.

This did not prevent the already established French from living quite normally, especially economically and commercially. Certainly, there were some effects caused by the unrest that Marseille had experienced since the beginning of the Revolution. The decision of the Constituent Assembly to take away from this same city all the privileges it enjoyed over the trade of the Levant, was not without consequences. But all this remained rather superficial and the French of Constantinople lived the first eighteen months of the revolution with relative serenity.



### **First concrete repercussions in Constantinople**

The year 1792, on the other hand, marked a first turning point in the daily life of our citizens.

As early as January, when Russians and Turks were making peace in Jassy, the exchange rate between the piaster and the ground experienced a sudden variation to the detriment of the French currency, which devalued by half. The imbalance in trade and the salaries of civil servants was immediate. If the French merchants had the means to cope, the staff of the embassy could only endure and be satisfied with half of their usual income. To compensate for this state of affairs and in a spirit of solidarity, the corps of merchants, of which Jacques was a member, met on 20 January 1792. The result of this meeting was a petition asking the authorities to improve the lot of the dragomans.

A few months later, sympathisers of the Revolution were beginning to be openly seen at the court of the Sultan, and among certain influential men in his entourage (perhaps the French declaration of war against Austria in April 1792 had encouraged this surge of sympathy). But they were not yet unanimous. The Extraordinary Envoy to the Sublime Porte, for example, had a sad experience. The Marquis de Sémonville was to take over this office in replacement of Ambassador Choiseul-Gouffier, who had been recalled to Paris. But he was portrayed to the Ottoman sovereign as such a fierce revolutionary that he simply refused to come to Turkey. Even a letter of recommendation from Louis XVI did nothing to change this. Sémonville was intercepted while passing through the Dardanelles Strait, and was forced to turn back. The ambassador remained temporarily in place.

### **The birth of the first-born**

The following month, precisely on July 25, 1792, the first child of Jacques and Sophie Fonton was born. Baptised four days later in the church of Saint-Pierre and Saint-Paul de Galata, he received the first names of Jacques, François and Antoine, in homage to his father and his two ancestors.

### *The suspension of the ambassador*

Almost at the same time (between 10 and 12 August) one of the most important events of the Revolution took place in France: the arrest of Louis XVI and his entire family. This time the consequences were almost immediate for the French colony of Constantinople. Ambassador Choiseul-Gouffier, representative of the deposed king in the Ottoman Empire, was relieved of his duties. Surprised by the suddenness of the decision and fearing for their future, Jacques Alléon and all the merchants met with the aim of signing a petition asking the Count of Choiseul-Gouffier to remain at his post at the beginning of October in an extraordinary assembly. This was done unanimously minus one, François Florenville, who considered that : « *Les négociants ne peuvent s'immiscer dans les affaires qui relèvent de l'ambassadeur seul*<sup>4</sup>. » (“Traders may not interfere in matters that are the sole responsibility of the ambassador.”).

But this request for maintenance, reinforced a few weeks earlier (at the time of the Sémonville affair) by a letter from Selîm III in favour of the same Choiseul-Gouffier, only had a delaying effect on what was to come. Indeed, at the beginning of December, the two deputies of the nation, Thoron and Boeuf, learned that in France the Convention had decreed personal and criminal charges against the Count of Choiseul-Gouffier, because of his intrigues and the « *volonté manifeste, qu'il ne craignait pas d'afficher, de toujours représenter le roi de France*<sup>5</sup> » (“the manifest will, which he was not afraid to display, to always represent the King of France”) recently arrested, let's recall. So, on 8 December 1792, the two men once again called an extraordinary meeting of all the merchants and the diplomatic corps, in order to take the decisions imposed by the new situation.

It would seem that, from then on, the French merchants of Constantinople had understood that their ambassador would eventually be condemned. It was in their own interests to disassociate themselves from him. They therefore ratified the suspension of his

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<sup>4</sup> Onnick Jamgocyan : op. cit., page 311.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Bonnault : op. cit., page 44.

functions and decided to replace him with a provisional leader, the result of an election. This was once again unanimously adopted, minus Florenville, which this time claimed that « *douze individus ne peuvent décider de l'opinion de tant d'autres* <sup>6</sup> » (“ twelve individuals cannot decide on the opinion of so many others”). It remained to elect this provisional leader of the French nation who would replace Ambassador Choiseul-Gouffier. Citizen Morin's proposal to choose Antoine Fonton, former first dragoman of France in Constantinople, because of his age, experience and enlightenment, was unanimously accepted. Jacques Alléon had therefore just voted for his own father-in-law.

As for the Count of Choiseul-Gouffier, whose situation had become more than delicate, he left Constantinople in a hurry and took refuge in Russia. Sometime after this dramatic episode, the French merchants of Constantinople learned that their ambassador had in fact played them well. Indeed, it was he who had managed to drive out his replacement, the unfortunate Sémonville. In order to achieve his ends, he had not hesitated to ask for the help of the powers allied against France (Austria, Prussia and Russia). Our poor merchants had been manipulated, but their naivety was reproached by some. This anecdote was the first fault line in the unity of the French community in the Levant.

### **The defection of diplomats**

The first revolutionary storm had hit Constantinople. The lightning had only fallen on the ambassador. The situation had calmed down and activities were slowly resuming. But history was on the move. Once again the sky darkened and violent explosions could be heard on the French side. The first of these shook the Ottoman capital in March 1793 with the news of the execution of King Louis XVI. Jean-Joseph Fonton, brother of the new leader of the French nation, described this disastrous event: « *Chaque Français semble être individuellement devenu un objet odieux aux habitants de Constantinople, de toutes les classes et de toutes les nations.* <sup>7</sup> »

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<sup>6</sup> Marie et Antoine Gautier : op. cit., page 76.

<sup>7</sup> Claude Bonnault : op. cit., page 52.

(“Each Frenchman seems to have individually become an odious object to the inhabitants of Constantinople, of all classes and nations.”). Then in April there was the betrayal of General Dumouriez, who had been in the Austrian camp. The month of June saw the end of the Gironde and the attempt to de-Christianise the Hebertists and the Enragés. This last point provoked a strong reaction from the Pope, who threatened to excommunicate all the civil servants working for the young Republic.

In addition to the four major events mentioned above, there was a host of minor inconveniences, the accumulation of which made life unbearable for the embassy officials. As public men, they were daily bothered in their work, placed in an awkward position in their religious life. Yet the only reproach that could be made against them was that they represented repressive and regimented leaders. Otherwise, their skills and conscientiousness remained intact. They were known and recognised for the good and loyal service they provided. In order to secure their services, foreign powers did not hesitate to offer them work and an excellent income, in addition to their protection. All they had to do was change their protector and any problems would disappear. And so they did. The first to cross the Rubicon was Jean-Joseph Fonton. As early as March, he decided to go under Russian protection. From May to October, many others followed: three Fonton, including Antoine (who was once hostile to the Russian faction), Charles Testa, who passed under Austrian protection. Louis Fornetti, Mathieu and Constantin Deval, for their part, decided to become French citizens again...

### **A wait-and-see attitude on the part of traders**

With these defections, the Revolution entered Constantinople at ground level, via the French Embassy. It had technically paralysed diplomatic relations between the young Republic and the Porte: « *il ne reste que seuls deux juniors-drogmans et le vieux Fonton* » (“there are only two junior-dragomans left and the old Fonton”) said British Ambassador Ainsue. Without an

ambassador, without an extraordinary envoy, without a dragoman, France no longer had a diplomatic representation in Constantinople at that time! In this context, how did the merchants of Constantinople feel, people like Jacques Alléon, who saw their daily business become singularly complicated?

Despite the fact that they, too, were subject to many decisions and events coming from Paris, their reaction was not negative. There were two reasons for this: on the one hand, they were beginning to accept the ideas of the young Republic, the consequences of which they could only indirectly perceive. On the other hand, and above all, the position they occupied tended to preserve them, to keep them safe from the political turmoil of the moment. Let us explain. The newly formed Public Salvation Committee had to reassure the Porte, and convince it of its good intentions towards it. Moreover, the young Republic was seeking international recognition. But the Sultan, out of caution, had not yet reacted to it. It was therefore necessary to put him in confidence. As for the merchants, they were simply protected by Paris. Trade between France and the Ottoman Empire was so important that it represented a real political stake. To attack them was to indirectly harm France. The Republic was well aware of this. It therefore preferred, in this particular case, to forget its revolutionary ideal and let itself be controlled by its own interests, which required it to protect the loyalty of its Levantine merchants at all costs.

For its part, the Porte knew that sooner or later it would have to work with the Committee of Public Salvation. Too many interests were at stake. In fact, the Sultan was acting with reserve. On the one hand, he did not dare to officialise a regime that was still unknown and unstable, and on the other hand, in the aftermath of severe defeats, he wanted to play the neutrality card in the face of his former enemies, now at war with France (Austria, Prussia, Spain, Holland, England...) and who were putting pressure on him. But the substance of his thinking was not particularly hostile to the Republic. Moreover, as he had no reason to be angry with the French of the port, he continued to treat them with benevolence. This moderate context, in spite of the Parisian events and the daily difficulties, meant that the French merchants remained on the whole relatively confident and optimistic. Moreover, none of them followed the example set by the

embassy officials that year. From Constantinople, they could not yet distinguish the black heaps of the storm that was about to hit France.

### **The creation of a Jacobin Club in Constantinople**

Everyone, therefore, according to their interests or ideals, had reacted differently to the situation. Diplomats withdrew, merchants like Jacques let themselves be carried along by the revolutionary waves. Other individuals, of course, unreservedly adopted the ideas of the Revolution and wanted to impose them on their fellow citizens.

Thus, for example, a group of one hundred and forty patriots, moderate in their actions, had created ‘the republican society of the friends of liberty and equality’. Under the impetus of this group, which sometimes included Jacques Alléon, small symbolic actions took place: organisation of a festival on 14 July 1793, planting of a freedom tree in the gardens of the Palais de France, composition of hymns to the supreme being... In short, nothing too bad so far. Other actions, on the other hand, had more consequences. The main one remains the creation of the Jacobin Club of Constantinople, and its affiliation to the Jacobin Society of Paris. Despite Robespierre’s reluctance, for the reasons mentioned above, this club was created on the 14th Vendémiaire, Year II.

Because this club « *prétendait faire la loi au nom de la nation*<sup>8</sup> » (“pretended to make the law in the name of the nation”), the atmosphere in the colony began to deteriorate. An opposition was born. It was made up of a group of people from the aforementioned republican society, united around a moderate revolutionary from the former regime, the citizen Descorches. This group met regularly in Péra, at the innkeeper Menard’s, and its aim was to counter the authoritarian actions of the Jacobins’ club. It included a certain Madame Alléon in its ranks. Without doubt it was Jacques’ mother, Thérèse Alléon/Marchand. Unless it was his wife, Sophie. Still, after the dragomans, the merchants and their families also began to ask themselves serious questions about their future. For the Alléons as for

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwik Biskupski : op. cit., page 488.

the others, the bellicose attitude of the Jacobin revolutionaries with whom they were in contact did not reassure them.

### **The acceleration of events in France, and the defection of traders**

Their fears at the end of 1793 were confirmed at the beginning of the following year. These were due in particular to the terror that reigned in France at that time. The liquidation of the indulgents and the drama of Germinal year II finally frightened them. At that very moment, many merchants, like their diplomats, abandoned France to seek protection in other nations. There were no less than eight of the dozen that made up the body of Constantinople in April 1794. Only a handful remained. Among them we find Florenville, a short-lived member of the Jacobin Club who became an idealist revolutionary, a man named Anthoine, who narrowly avoided the bankruptcy of his trading house, but who lost his activities in the Russian Empire, and above all Jacques Alléon, who, despite his personal interests, chose to remain loyal to his country.

### **Optimism and patriotism: the exception of Jacques Alléon**

Yet Jacques had a solution. It would have allowed him to continue his commercial activities in France, while sheltering himself from the Revolution. This solution was the one used by his companions. It consisted of passing under foreign protection, and continuing his trade, through a nominee. He did not do so, although intrigues and difficulties were pushing him towards this way out.

These difficulties were numerous. Let us illustrate them with an example, representative of the confusion that reigned in commercial affairs at that time. In December 1792 and March 1793, Jacques Alléon had bales of wool from the Black Sea brought to Constantinople. There, he had them loaded onto a ship leaving for the port of Marseille, where they were to be received by the... Ange Rambaud, of course. Unfortunately in France, famine being rife, the convention enforced a programme of economic dirigisme based on numerous shippers (monopoly laws, forced loans...). Thus, as soon as

Jacques' goods arrived at their destination, they were arbitrarily confiscated "on behalf of the Republic", and the Convention informed him that, after verification, "only the properties of the patriots would be respected". The word "patriot" took on its full meaning here! Jacques then attested, as a first step, to his ownership of this property. He then wrote a letter of complaint to Descorches. The contents of this letter, dated 18 Prairial, year II, are a clear demonstration of Jacques' probity and confidence, which should enable him to recover his rights: « *ma conduite t'est trop connue...* », « *la confiance que m'inspirent et les décrets de la Convention et ton amour pour la justice...* » ("my conduct is all too familiar to you...", "the confidence I have in you and the decrees of the Convention and your love for justice."). Believing that he had nothing to reproach himself for, he asked for his rights to be restored. No doubt he was successful? Unfortunately, the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs do not have the answer.

### **The end of the revolutionary crisis in Constantinople**

Jacques' patience finally paid off. On 9 Thermidor year II, a new page of the French Revolution was turned. The almighty Robespierre fell, taking with him the regime of terror he had established. A much calmer and more moderate period opened in France with the constitution of the year III (1795).

Outside our borders, victories over the enemy multiplied: invasion of Piedmont, recapture of Valenciennes, occupation of Aachen, capture of Cologne, Maëstricht, Nijmegen, occupation of Holland, pacification of the Vendée... So many events that restored confidence to the French people. Whether it was in France or in the Levant, the latter now aspired to stability, and their wishes were finally granted. For in Constantinople, too, spirits calmed down as if by magic from the 9th Thermidor onwards. From this date onwards, there are hardly any revolutionary acts or demands other than symbolic ones.

In April and May 1795, the treaties of Basel and The Hague confirmed the calm. However, the Eastern Latins were already experiencing all this from a distance. Descorches had continued his moderate policy until his departure in April 1795. His record was a



very honourable one, for he had arrived alone, isolated, without any official guarantee or instructions as to his conduct, in a period of great unrest. He had been able to direct the opinion of the Turkish people in favour of France and had managed the revolutionary and diplomatic crisis, only to leave a port where everything had become calm again. No arrests, no executions seem to have been committed in Constantinople during this period! Certainly other events took place in the years that followed, but their symbolic character makes it possible to say that Descorches pacified the port and skilfully pulled it out of the Revolution before its time.

As for Jacques Alléon, he no longer had the sword of Damocles hanging over his head, and he could at last go about his business without fear of the next day. At least he thought so!

## **IN BETWEEN CRISES**

### **Jacques Alléon deputy of the nation**

In addition to the resumption of his commercial activities, Jacques Alléon was elected deputy of the nation for 1796 and 1797. He began his mandate as second deputy, associated with Louis Anthoine, and on behalf of the extraordinary envoy who had replaced Descorches since April 1795: Raymond de Verninac de Saint-Maur. But he worked only for a very short time with this diplomat. In fact, on 8 February 1796 the thirty-third French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, General Aubert du Bayet, arrived in Constantinople.

During the two years he spent as representative of the merchants of Constantinople, Jacques Alléon only had to manage the day-to-day business of the port. Probably a lot of work for little glory, since two centuries later we remember only one thing: that nothing important happened.

The only fact on which we will dwell is the appointment of Jacques Alléon as civil administrator of the Constantinopolitan ecclesiastical property. It is not that his action was decisive in this affair: he only had the role of executor. But if we want to try to be exhaustive in analysing the repercussions of the French Revolution in Constantinople, we cannot afford to ignore the spiritual problems. For this reason, the history of the convent of Saint-Benoît, in which Jacques Alléon was slightly involved, seems significant.

### **The case of the convent of Saint-Benoît**

The building that can still be seen today, in the heart of Istanbul's old Genoese quarter, dates back to 1865. It probably has little to do with the first building that the Benedictines founded in 1427! When the Turks took over the city in 1453, their Sultan Mehmet II granted the Peroites a special status, Dhimmitude. This status guaranteed them the consecrated use and administration of their places of worship. The Catholic convent of St. Benedict was Ottoman property and could therefore continue to live. In 1540, as part of the agreements between France and the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Suleiman

the Magnificent donated the monastery to Francis I, who himself allowed the Benedictines to continue to administer it. Finally, at the suggestion of the Perotis, with the new owner decided, forty-three years later, to replace the Benedictines with the Jesuits. The newcomers, faithful to their ministry, immediately founded a school in the outbuildings of the convent.

Until that time, Saint-Benedict had always lived under the protection of the King of France, and had benefited from his resources. Destroyed four times, the church was rebuilt four times at the expense of the kingdom. It was an integral part of the territory of France and was directly under its administration.

However, in 1773, the Pope dissolved the Society of Jesus, causing the administration of St. Benedict to become vacant. Louis XVI was late in appointing the Lazarists to replace the Jesuits. He did not make a decision until ten years later, in 1783. This delay had given ambitious ideas to many people, many of whom were now discussing French ownership.

So when the Revolution came...

In France, the new strongmen revolted against the nobility, the king (the owner of the convent), and the clergy. One could not do worse for Saint-Benedict! Moreover, the state of the royal treasury was lamentable, the problems to be managed were insurmountable: the future of the Eastern Christian missions was at that moment the last of the problems that preoccupied our leaders. The France of 1789 cut the umbilical cord. At the same time and for the same causes, Lazarist properties throughout the country were being destroyed and plundered: the mother house of the new administrators could not provide any subsistence credit to Saint-Benedict and its occupants. As a result, they were left to their own devices and began to experience an unenviable situation of destitution.

From then on, the competition was open and everyone went to try to appropriate Saint Benedict: the Latin clergy of Istanbul tried to redeem him, for fear that the young Republic, hostile to the Church, would sell the property as national property. Austria, out of a concern for grandeur and prestige, tried to substitute its protectorate for that of France for all Eastern Catholic buildings. The religious in general demanded that all Eastern Catholic properties and missions be handed over to the Holy See. The people, for their part, wanted to see

the property of Saint Benedict entrusted to his parishioners, the Peroites, with the protectorate remaining in France. But the arbitrator remained the Sultan, and the years went by without anything happening. So, contrary to the first revolutionary ideas - guided by instinct - the 'new' France of 1793 changed its policy and tried to mingle with the parish priest it had provoked. Its aim now was to reclaim its Eastern religious congregations. Let us remember that Muslims should not be scandalised or lose their consideration, because the stakes were high. In the end, there were many suitors.

In Saint-Benedict, it was precisely the Ottomans who were responsible for restoring order that year. The confusion was such that they decided to affix seals throughout the building. In this way, no one could take anything over. They then appointed one of their Catholic subjects, Father Delenda, as administrator. Father Delenda, a former Jesuit who knew the place well, remained under the supervision of a Muslim, the voivode of Pera. The Turkish intervention seems to have borne fruit, as a relative calm returned to St. Benedict's from that date. Delenda managed - despite the situation - to take over the administration and to dispatch the day-to-day business of the church. And time passed.

Three years later, on 1 November 1796, the newly appointed ambassador Aubert du Bayet, who had just been appointed to Constantinople, decided to regain France's rights over Saint-Benedict. He appointed three people to carry out this reconquest: an embassy chargé d'affaires, Pierre Ruffin, as well as the two deputies of the day, Louis Anthoine and Jacques Alléon. The three men were invested with all the powers that their new position as Commissioner of the Republic implied. They found a favourable echo to their demands with the Ottoman leaders, too happy to see this affair finally settled. Their mission was therefore going well.

With the verbal agreement of the Reïs-Effendi, Jacques and his companions made the voivode lift his seals. They then provisionally affixed their own instead. Father Delenda was confirmed as administrator. Four days later, our three commissioners had obtained the official papers of the Divan. These documents enabled France to recover its property rights, as well as its role as administrator and protector of Saint-Benedict. All the protagonists then went to Jacques Alléon's house to sign the minutes that ratified

the Divan's decision. After six years of “competitions fuelled by the general disarray due to bad faith and violence”, the affair of the convent of Saint-Benedict was finally settled. The energy of a new volunteer ambassador, combined with the dedicated and conscientious support of the people he had surrounded himself with for this affair, brought Saint-Benedict out of the crisis.

### **The death of the Ambassador**

A year passed. On 5th December 1797, General Aubert du Bayet suddenly contracted a « *fièvre bilieuse, putride, inflammatoire et miliare*<sup>9</sup> » (“bilious, putrid, inflammatory and miliary fever”). In spite of all the care provided by doctors Olivier, Bénévéni and Maugin, his condition, until then stationary, suddenly worsened on December 16th. He died the following night. A skilful, upright, firm and prudent man, General Aubert du Bayet was one of the best soldiers of the Republic, who had distinguished himself during the war. This man, who commanded admiration for his charisma, had quickly exerted a great influence on the Porte, which he advised and helped a great deal militarily. He was much appreciated by all in Constantinople, and his sudden death was felt with great emotion.

Pierre Ruffin, who was acting in his position, organised the funeral. A prominent man and the first deputy of the port, Jacques had the duty to take part in this important ceremony. Ruffin's biographer, Henri Dehérain, left a very interesting description of it. We will limit ourselves to quoting him: « *La cérémonie eut lieu le 28 frimaire an VI (18 décembre 1797). Le cercueil couvert de drapeaux tricolores sortit du Palais porté par huit citoyens en uniforme national. Il était précédé des janissaires, de la maison de l'ambassadeur, de celles des ministres étrangers en grande livrée, et accompagné par deux colonnes de citoyens ayant à leur tête, celle de droite le général Menant et le premier député de la nation (Jacques Alléon), celle de gauche Castera et le second député (Vincent Pech). Marchant immédiatement derrière le cercueil Ruffin conduisait le deuil. Il était suivi des ministres étrangers et de leurs légations en costume, des*

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<sup>9</sup> Henri Dehérain : La vie de Pierre Ruffin, orientaliste et diplomate 1742-1824. Tome premier, pages 121. Paris 1929. Courtoisie de monsieur et madame Antoine Gautier.

*négociants étrangers et français. Le cortège descendit jusqu'à l'extrémité de la grande terrasse du jardin. Aubert du Bayet y avait fait planter des saules pleureurs et des cyprès, c'est là qu'il fut inhumé suivant son vœu. Après la cérémonie, l'une des strophes de la Marseillaise, amour sacré de la patrie, fut chantée. Ruffin réunit ensuite tous les assistants dans la salle d'audience du palais, remercia en son nom et au nom de l'ambassadrice les ministres et les autres étrangers, puis les reconduisit suivant l'étiquette ».* (“ The ceremony took place on the 28th frimaire year VI (18th December 1797). The coffin covered with tricolour flags left the Palace carried by eight citizens in national uniform. It was preceded by the janissaries, from the ambassador's house and from the house of the foreign ministers in a large livery, and accompanied by two columns of citizens headed by General Menant on the right and the first deputy of the nation (Jacques Alléon), and Castera on the left and the second deputy (Vincent Pech). Walking immediately behind the coffin Ruffin led the mourners. He was followed by foreign ministers and their legations in costume, foreign and French merchants. The procession went down to the end of the large garden terrace. Aubert du Bayet had had weeping willows and cypresses planted there, and it was there that he was buried according to his wish. After the ceremony, one of the stanzas of the Marseillaise, sacred love of the country, was sung. Ruffin then gathered all those present in the audience room of the palace, thanked the ministers and other foreigners on his behalf and on behalf of the ambassador, and then escorted them back to the palace according to the etiquette”).

## THE EGYPTIAN CRISIS

### 1798, and the Egyptian campaign

Nowadays, the main memories evoked by the Egyptian campaign are the deciphering of the hieroglyphic writing by Champollion, and the image of the Luxor obelisk, which adorns the Place de la Concorde in Paris. However, if this expedition does indeed mark by its cultural side the birth of modern archaeology and of what is called Egyptology, it remains nevertheless at the origin of a vast political-military operation.

The reasons that motivated France were twofold. On the one hand, the Directory was concerned about the growing fame acquired by one of its young generals. After the capture of Toulon and the suppression of a royalist insurrection in Paris, Napoleon Bonaparte had once again won a dazzling victory in Italy (1796-1797 campaign). The directors therefore sought to remove from the capital the man who was already known as the “providential man”. It would have been awkward, however, in these difficult times, to do without such military talent. And it was precisely at this time that France was planning to threaten England in the eastern Mediterranean, in order to cut off the route to India, and thus harm its commercial exchanges. The choice of Egypt, the crossroads of Africa and Asia, open to the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea, was geographically necessary to carry out this operation. As the country had been weakened for thirty years by anarchy, plague and famine, it was an ideal prey for the French army. These were the reasons that motivated the expedition to Egypt at the end of 1798.

Yes, but that's it! Egypt had been under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire since 1517. It was unlikely that the Turks would look at the annexing of a region they had ruled for almost three centuries without considering reprisals. Our troops had already allowed themselves to occupy the Dalmatian shores of the Adriatic in the same way, and the Turks had said nothing to avoid tarnishing their good relations with France! At this point it became a bit too much: by the time he understood Bonaparte's intentions, Sultan Selîm III concluded an alliance with the Russians and the British, and declared war on France.

## *The arrest of the French*

The young French Republic had forty-two civil servants and 1,800 private individuals in the Ottoman Empire. It was not the first time that the Turks had gone to war against a power that had diplomatic or commercial representation on their territory. However, they had always respected the rights of the enemies and the inviolability of their chancelleries. This time, however, as soon as the declaration of war was announced, a wind of madness blew over Constantinople. Everything that had anything to do with France was swept away by Ottoman arbitrariness.

On 2 September 1798, Pierre Ruffin and his two dragomans, Kieffer and Dantan, were arrested at the Porte. The French palace was taken over by the Turkish army and turned into a prison. Then began a vast manhunt which lasted several days, and in which no one was spared: diplomats, merchants, craftsmen, religious, were apprehended and put into captivity.

A fortnight later, the Sultan issued a firman ordering all French citizens to go to the Palais de France to become prisoners, « *sous peine d'être traités en espions et en voleurs* » (“on pain of being treated as spies and thieves.”). He also threatened to punish anyone who gave them asylum. Most of our compatriots who were still in hiding then surrendered to the Turkish authorities. Their fate was not an enviable one: diplomats were imprisoned in the castle of the Seven Towers, craftsmen were imprisoned, and merchants were deported to the Black Sea. This was followed by acts of looting and vandalism, such as the ransacking of the French chancellery: emptied of its valuables, archives and library, its chests were broken into and its colourful mast was knocked down...

As for the merchants, they were perhaps the most affected by these spoliations and confiscations. Indeed, as soon as they were arrested, the Turkish government had an inventory made of the goods contained in their properties. Then, from November 1, 1798, the stocks were taken out of the shops and sold at auction on behalf of the Turkish government. The debts of the Ottoman subjects to the French traders were cancelled at the same time. The trader François



Florenville, for example, had his collection of works of art and paintings looted and then bought back at very low prices by the dragoman of the Porte, Prince Ypsilanti. Quite simply...

### *A special case: the fate of Jacques Alléon*

During the first week, Jacques went into hiding to avoid prison. An unfortunate actor in this story, left out of the Egyptian expedition, he passed on a poignant testimony of this month of September 1798: « *Dès le moment de la déclaration de guerre, toutes les gardes par ordre du gouvernement se jetaient sur les républicains avec une fureur extrême, les saisissaient, les traitaient ignominieusement et les conduisaient au Palais où ils se trouvent aujourd'hui entassés comme de vils criminels [...] Quant à moi, j'ai pu me soustraire à la poursuite des gardes turcs, et je me trouve caché chez un ami, d'où je vous fais entendre les accents de ma douleur. Séparé de mes enfants, je souffre encore plus de leur privation que des malheurs qui m'accablent.*<sup>10</sup> » (“From the moment of the declaration of war, all the guards by order of the government threw themselves at the Republicans with extreme fury, seized them, treated them ignominiously and led them to the Palace where they are now piled up like vile criminals [...] As for me, I was able to escape from the pursuit of the Turkish guards, and I find myself hiding in a friend’s house, from where I let you hear the accents of my pain. Separated from my children, I suffer even more from their deprivation than from the misfortunes that overwhelm me.”). His property was, as with other traders, confiscated and resold. « *Je n'ai plus rien, tout m'a été enlevé*<sup>11</sup> » (“I have nothing left, everything has been taken away from me.”) he wrote on this subject. As for his fate following the imperial firman, we unfortunately do not know it in detail. It would seem, however, that Jacques managed to avoid incarceration and deportation. He was apparently one of the very few Frenchmen to obtain the protection of Ragusa’s government. We find him, in fact, trading on behalf of this small republic from the end of 1798. He had been one of the rare merchants to avoid the renunciation of his

<sup>10</sup> Lettre du 24 fructidor an VI (10 septembre 1798), dans le livre de Henri Dehérain : op. cit., pages 150 et 151.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

nationality during the Revolution, and he was one of the few to do so this time.

### **Death**

The French in Constantinople were not liberated until our troops evacuated Egypt in September 1801. Most of them lived for three years in unjust captivity. Their liberation was, as one can imagine, a great relief for the French colony. However, on this twelfth day of September 1801, when all the French families of the port were celebrating the return of one of their own, the Alléon family was mourning a departure. Jacques had just been called back to God at the age of forty-eight. He left behind him seven children. The oldest was nine years old, the youngest, Christine, thirteen months old.

He was probably buried in the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, which was his parish. Later, in 1859, his son Jacques had his ashes transferred to the crypt of the newly built Saint-Esprit church. A funeral plaque in Latin is still there today, honouring his memory.

His wife, Sophie Fonton, remained a widow for forty-three years. She died in Constantinople on March 6, 1845. She was buried in the church of Sainte-Marie Draperis, before she too was transferred to Saint-Esprit, alongside her husband.

### **The descendants of Jacques François Alléon**

They married and had seven children:

- **Jacques, François, Antoine**, who will follow.

- **Elisabeth, Marie**.

Baptised on 29th November 1793 in St Peter and St Paul, she married Philippe Romani, later Denmark's first dragoman in Constantinople, in Büyükdere on 28th April 1822. She died in January 1864.

- **Marie, Thérèse**.

She was born on 27th January 1795 in Constantinople and was baptised in St Peter and St Paul on the 30th of the same month. On 1st October 1821, she married the first dragoman of the British Embassy

in Constantinople, Frederic Pisani, in Büyükdere. On that day, an English traveller passing through Constantinople attended the wedding. Mylevy Strangford (that was her name) was very fond of the customs and traditions of the Latin East. She presented the bride with a diamond crescent.

The couple had at least four children: Marie, Adèle, Barthélémy and Victor. Thérèse Alléon died on December 1st 1877.

- *Antoine, Théodore.*

Born on 31st March 1797 in Constantinople. He died, unmarried, at Courville (Eure et Loir) on 25th April 1881. His body was repatriated to Constantinople, to be buried in the family crypt of the Saint-Esprit church, on 19 May of the same year. He led a career as a financier, in the shadow of his elder brother, Jacques, for whom he worked. However, his qualities as a banker earned him the Légion d'Honneur, with the rank of knight (14 February 1850).

- *Jeanne, Françoise.*

Born in 1798 in Constantinople and baptised at home. We know nothing more about her.

- *Jean-François.*

Born on 12nd July 1799 in Constantinople. At the age of forty-six, he married (on 26th April 1846) Honorine Stiepovitch, a thirty-year-old woman from Ragusa, whose father Mathieu had served France as a dragoman at the embassy. Unfortunately, the latter died on 6 April 1861, leaving him no children. Jean-François was, like Theodore, a banker for his elder brother Jacques. He died in Büyükdere in July 1879.

- *Joséphine, Christine.*

Born on 3 August 1800 in Constantinople. Wife of Jacques Salzani, a banker of Neapolitan origin, she died on 19 November 1836 in Constantinople, leaving at least three children: Théodore, Félix and Théophile.

*Christophe ALLEON*  
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